

6-1-1944

The Palimpsest, vol.25 no.6, June 1944

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

"The Palimpsest, vol.25 no.6, June 1944." *The Palimpsest* 25 (1944).

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol25/iss6/1>

This Full Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

The **P**ALIMPSEST

JUNE 1944

CONTENTS

Origins of Iowa Masonry 161

HARRISON JOHN THORNTON

Birth of the Grand Lodge 173

HARRISON JOHN THORNTON

The Ringlings of McGregor 179

MARIAN CARROLL RISCHMUELLER

PUBLISHED MONTHLY AT IOWA CITY BY
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT IOWA CITY IOWA
UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912

THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSEST

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

PRICE — 10 cents per copy: \$1 per year: free to Members

ADDRESS — The State Historical Society, Iowa City, Iowa

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XXV

ISSUED IN JUNE 1944

NO. 6

COPYRIGHT 1944 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



Origins of Iowa Masonry

As a prelude to the consideration of the beginnings of Freemasonry in Iowa, a brief notation of the fraternity's course preceding its appearance in the Commonwealth will be not only useful but, to some degree, necessary. The existence of Freemasonry is asserted by tradition in times long before its attestation in historical documents. Those who ponder upon the logic and implications of the ancient legends sometimes think it not unreasonable to conclude that the true origins of the fraternity belong to that period before the dawn of history when men began to apply the rudiments of geometry in the construction of buildings, and to be conscious of the gracious fact of brotherhood. One of the most persistent legends within the historic period is that the erection of the great temple at Jerusalem during the reign of King Solomon was a Masonic achievement.

In the medieval guilds of master builders, modern Masons recognize their operative brethren.

It is well known that during the Middle Ages Masons were associated together in lodges for the preservation of the secrets of their trade skills and the enjoyment and practice of fraternity. The continuance of the order was assured by the careful selection of youths for instruction in the building arts. But with the coming of modern times the medieval craft guilds in general suffered progressive decline. It eventually became clear that some of them were being held together by fraternal ties after they had ceased to be operative organizations. With the loss of significance, the substance of their former vitality more and more yielded to repetitive formalism.

The year 1717 is an important one in the history of Freemasonry for at that time a few of the surviving lodges in London, England, met together to organize a Grand Lodge and revive the fainting craft. Inherent in this movement was a transition of the order from an operative to a speculative basis, as increasing numbers of men who had no thought of becoming operative masons were intrigued by the deepening esoteric qualities of the association. A new intellectual leadership appeared, and while many of the ancient landmarks and symbols were retained, the Masonic order, in the course of time, was completely converted into a moral and philosophic system.

As to the beginning of Masonry in English America, it is a reasonable suggestion that members of the fraternity crossed the Atlantic in seventeenth century ships. Undoubtedly Freemasons of the speculative sort were to be found in the colonies before subordinate lodges were authorized by the Grand Lodge. Some were set up without authorization, and it is interesting to note that Benjamin Franklin was made a Mason in such a lodge in Pennsylvania in 1731. The authentic establishment of Masonry in America, however, dates from June 5, 1730, when Daniel Coxe was empowered by the Grand Lodge of England as Provincial Grand Master of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Four years later, Henry Price was commissioned Provincial Grand Master of New England. Following the American Revolution, the several Grand bodies in the independent States severed jurisdictional though not fraternal relations with the Grand Lodge of England.

Freemasonry made its appearance in Iowa during the 1830's. Members of the order were found in the wagons and on the boats that brought the vanguard of white men to the new land. Some were among the workers of the mining community at Dubuque. It is known that certain of these were made Masons in Far West Lodge at Galena,

Illinois, before any lodge existed in Iowa. Robert Lucas, the first Governor of Iowa Territory, and his secretary, Theodore S. Parvin, were both Masons, and their sympathy and assistance were highly important in giving Freemasonry authoritative establishment at Burlington, the newly-proclaimed capital.

What is reputed to be the first published word attesting the active existence of Freemasonry in Iowa was a notice appearing in the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* of November 5, 1840. It was a call for a meeting. "The regular members of the Masonic Fraternity of the Territory of Iowa are requested to meet in the rooms over the store of Ralston and Patterson, near the National Hotel, in the city of Burlington, on Wednesday evening next, 11th November, A. D. 1840, A. L. 5840 at 6 o'clock P. M."

Theodore S. Parvin read this notice with interest, and presented himself at the designated place. But there was no sign of life. No preparation for a gathering had been made. The doors were shut, the windows darkened. Was there confusion among the brethren? The record does not say, but on the following evening a group met at the carpenter shop of Evan Evans. The company, earnest and purposeful, was indeed representative of the varied body of speculative Masonry, being

composed of a merchant, a justice, a lawyer, a physician, a carpenter, a farmer, a miner, a landlord, a hotel steward, and a legislator or two.

At this historic meeting the pioneer Masons decided to apply to the Grand Lodge of Missouri for dispensation of authority to organize a lodge in Burlington. A petition was drafted by Brother William Thompson, patterned, probably, after a model found in "the only Masonic book accessible, . . . *Some of the Beauties of Freemasonry*, by Joshua Bradley, A. M., published in Rutland, Vermont, in 1816." Before Theodore S. Parvin forwarded it to the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, it bore, in addition to his own name, the signatures of William Thompson, Hiram C. Bennett, Evan Evans, William Frye, Chauncey Swan, Thomas H. Curts, and Robert Lucas. During the two weeks which elapsed before a response was received, the eager brethren held several meetings for the purpose of instruction, and to practice the ceremonies of opening and closing lodge in the three degrees; also that the brethren, coming as they did from different jurisdictions, "might compare their work and adjust differences."

The eagerly awaited event occurred on November 29, 1840. On that day, a Sunday, the steamboat *Hudson* brought the coveted dispensa-

tion which bore the date of November 20, 1840. The delighted brethren lost no time in putting their new powers into effect. They assembled on the following evening and organized Burlington Lodge No. 41. The numbering was, of course, in the Missouri succession. Parvin wrote in his diary: "*First Lodge in the Territory of Iowa.*" The three principal officers were appointed by the Grand Lodge of Missouri: Hiram C. Bennett, Master; William Thompson, Senior Warden; and Evan Evans, Junior Warden. On October 20, 1841, the Grand Lodge of Missouri issued a formal charter to the lodge at Burlington. The name then used, however, was Des Moines Lodge, and as such it has been known ever since.

The second point of entrance for Masonry into Iowa was at Muscatine, or Bloomington, as it was then called. Some of the Masons in that town had been interested in the organization of the Burlington lodge. Moreover, Theodore S. Parvin became prosecuting attorney for the Second Judicial District and moved to Bloomington. His Masonic activities in Burlington had taught him how to proceed, and on Christmas day, 1840, by his advice, a notice was published in the Bloomington *Herald*: "There will be a meeting of Free and Accepted Masons at the home of Josiah Parvin [Theodore's father] on Wednesday, the 30th

inst., for the purpose of taking into consideration the formation of a lodge in this place. Members in good standing are respectfully invited to attend."

The surviving record of this meeting is not as extensive as the comparable one at Burlington. It is obvious, however, that a petition to the Grand Lodge of Missouri for a dispensation was agreed upon, and that following its dispatch, the hopeful brothers were assembled on several occasions for study, instruction, and practice. The superior body of Missouri was quick to respond, and the important parchment, dated February 4, 1841, was received on February 12th. Parvin had the distinction of having signed the first two petitions for dispensations issuing from Iowa Territory, and of being a member of the two initial lodges, although it was necessary for him to demit from the Burlington group before he could be admitted at Bloomington. Iowa Lodge No. 42 was actually organized on Monday, February 15, 1841. The Grand Lodge appointed Ansel Humphreys, Master; John Lilly, Jr., Senior Warden; and B. S. Olds, Junior Warden. Theodore S. Parvin, who had been Junior Deacon at Burlington, was elected Senior Deacon at Bloomington, and Josiah Parvin, his father, was elected Treasurer.

Within a few weeks this lodge was ambitiously

concerned about securing a building for a permanent home. The arrangement it eventually made was unique. After negotiations with the officers of the Episcopalian congregation, it was agreed that the Masons would build a second story on the building being erected by the church group. This was done in 1841, and Iowa Lodge continued to occupy this first Masonic building in the Territory until 1854.

Dubuque, which was the earliest home of Masons in Iowa, did not long delay in forming a lodge. Among those prominent in the order there was James Smith, a Past Grand Master of New Hampshire, and it may well be supposed that he exerted a directive influence upon his brethren. One of the factors quickening the decision to effect an organization of Dubuque Masons seems to have been a deepening concern about certain lawless elements that had drifted into the diggings. Being lovers of law and order they came more and more to feel that the community would be benefited from the establishment of a lodge.

It was on July 18, 1842, that a small group of Masons gathered for a meeting in the Shakespeare House, a rude building used as a theater, owned and operated by Timothy Fanning who was also an alderman of the town. Fanning was present at the meeting. So was George W. Cummins

who, as the first sheriff of Dubuque County, had been called upon to execute two condemned men. James Smith was among those attending and, because of his previous distinguished position in New Hampshire, was requested to preside at the meeting. The result of this gathering was a decision to request a dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Missouri making possible the organization of a lodge in Dubuque. Named in the petition as the three principal officers-elect were Timothy Fanning, Master; George W. Cummins, Senior Warden; and Narcissus Nadeau, Junior Warden. All three were members of Far West Lodge of Galena.

Favorable action was taken by the Missouri jurisdiction, and the dispensation was signed on October 10, 1842. The lodge was speedily organized on October 21, 1842, in the Shakespeare House, though afterward it met over the drug store of Brother Timothy Mason. Exactly a year later, the Letters of Dispensation were surrendered and a charter was received by Dubuque Lodge No. 62 bearing the date of October 10, 1843.

This review of the origins of Freemasonry in Iowa may be concluded with the organization of one more lodge, at Iowa City, since it was these four groups that united to achieve the creation of

the Grand Lodge of Iowa. Following what had become customary procedure, a notice appeared in the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, on January 8, 1842, calling all "Brethren of the Mystic Tie" to meet for the purpose of seeking a dispensation to establish a lodge. The gathering, which assembled at "candle lighting time" on January 13th, in "Doc" William Reynolds's schoolroom, directed William Reynolds, William B. Snyder, and Abraham I. Willis to draw up and dispatch the petition to the Grand Lodge of Missouri. Though the application was made about six months earlier than that of the Dubuque Masons, the dispensation was granted to Iowa City Lodge No. 63 at the same time, October 10, 1842, and a year later to the day, this was replaced by a charter, as at Dubuque.

On December 9, 1842, nine master Masons assembled to exercise the permission of the dispensation. Among those present in addition to Reynolds, Snyder, and Willis, were James R. Hartsock and Chauncey Swan. The work of establishing the lodge was performed in due and ancient form. William Reynolds had been named Master of the lodge in the dispensation, which also designated William B. Snyder as the first Senior Warden, and Abraham I. Willis as Junior Warden. All were leaders in the new capital of

the Territory. Reynolds, English born and a Boston schoolmaster, was pioneering in education and active in organizing the Methodist Church; Snyder, a contractor from Cincinnati, built the first Iowa City courthouse, the Methodist Church, and superintended construction work on the capitol in 1842; and Willis was prominent in organizing the Iowa City Manufacturing Company and other business enterprises. Chauncey Swan had helped locate the site of Iowa City and served as commissioner to lay out the town, sell lots, and build the capitol.

The most aggressive member of the Iowa City Masonic circle was James R. Hartsock. Born in Pennsylvania he had come to Burlington in 1838 at the age of twenty. There he was made a Mason, being the first candidate to receive the degrees in Iowa. He participated in fraternal activities with such enthusiasm that he presently became Senior Deacon and in 1842 was sent as a delegate to the Grand Lodge of Missouri. For his share in organizing the Iowa City lodge he was chosen as first Senior Deacon, but he was a disruptive influence among his brethren. Upon a charge of unmasonic conduct in connection with a petition for the establishment of a chapter of Royal Arch Masons at Iowa City, the District Deputy Grand Master of Missouri, Ansel Humphreys, ordered

the Worshipful Master of the Iowa City lodge to arrest Hartsock's Senior Deacon's jewel. It has been alleged that in a fit of anger Hartsock tore from the record book the notations of proceedings of the Iowa City lodge during the period it operated under dispensation. That he eventually made peace with his brethren is evident, because his Senior Deacon's jewel was restored; he served as Master of his lodge in Iowa City in 1857, 1863, 1871, and 1872; and was elected Grand Master of Masons in Iowa for the year 1858-59.

These were the four Iowa lodges which, even before all were finally chartered, began to plan a Grand Lodge for Iowa. The leaders in Burlington, Bloomington, Dubuque, and Iowa City joined in the project of establishing a separate jurisdiction.

HARRISON JOHN THORNTON

Birth of the Grand Lodge

It was inevitable that Iowa Masons would soon begin to think of establishing a Grand Lodge of their own. Curiously, the first suggestion that this be done seems to have come from the Far West Lodge of Galena, Illinois, which itself desired to be included in the Iowa jurisdiction. Another similar proposal came from Rising Sun Lodge at Montrose. This group was within the Territory but, like an early lodge at Keokuk, was considered "subordinate to influences emanating from the Mormon center." Both of these lodges fell under the ban of the Grand Lodge of Illinois, which had chartered them, and their title was shadowed in the esteem of Iowa Freemasonry. They were not permitted to participate in the work of evoking a Grand jurisdiction in Iowa.

It was in Des Moines Lodge at Burlington, on October 31, 1842, that a proposal was adopted to form a committee to communicate with the other lodges on the subject of organizing a Grand Lodge. The Bloomington Masons responded by proposing that a convention be called to assemble in Iowa City. Dubuque consented, and the Iowa City lodge appointed Chauncey Swan, A. J. Wil-

lis, and Lewis S. Swafford to serve as a committee of arrangements. The convention was in session from the ninth to the eleventh of May, 1843, and resolutions were adopted calling for the dispatch of a delegation to the Grand Lodge of Missouri to request enabling power. This delegation, composed of Oliver Cock (Burlington), Ansel Humphreys and Theodore S. Parvin (Bloomington), John Johnson (Dubuque), and James R. Hartsock (Iowa City), attended the session of the Grand Lodge of Missouri and their petition was granted. Thereafter, these delegates made arrangements for a convention at Iowa City to "ordain a constitution, make by-laws, elect Grand officers and do all other things requisite to the perfect organization of the Grand Lodge of Iowa." Iowa City was selected as the place of meeting, the date to be January 2, 1844.

Three delegates were appointed by each of the lodges: J. H. McKinney, Wesley Jones, and H. T. Hugins of Burlington; Ansel Humphreys, T. S. Parvin, and B. S. Olds of Bloomington; Timothy Fanning, George W. Cummins, and Thomas S. Wilson of Dubuque; and William Reynolds, S. M. Ballard, and James R. Hartsock of Iowa City. Certain other delegates were present from the chartered Rising Sun Lodge of Montrose, and from Eagle Lodge at Keokuk and

Clinton Lodge at Davenport, the two latter still operating under dispensation. Sharp controversy speedily developed in respect to these lodges and their delegates. In the end, Rising Sun Lodge was not permitted to participate in the convention. Delegates from Eagle and Clinton Lodges took part in the discussion, but their votes were not recorded.

It was well known that Iowa Lodge of Bloomington ardently desired the honor of providing the first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge in the person of Ansel Humphreys. But the Burlington Masons, who had initiated the project, quietly approached the Iowa City delegates with the proposition that if they would oppose Humphreys and support a Burlington candidate, the Burlington delegates would press for James R. Hartsock as Grand Secretary. Standing in the way of this "deal", however, was the positive instruction of Iowa City Lodge to its delegates to give united support to Humphreys for the high office. But, like Caesar, Hartsock was ambitious. Nor were the other Iowa City delegates insensible to the distinction that would come to their lodge in providing the Grand Secretary. When the first ballot was taken in the election of the supreme officer, the vote stood six for Ansel Humphreys, Worshipful Master of Iowa Lodge, and six for Oliver

Cock, Worshipful Master of Des Moines Lodge. Supporting the first were all the delegates from Bloomington and Dubuque, and demanding the latter were all the delegates from Burlington and Iowa City. This deadlock was broken by Ansel Humphreys who withdrew his name and, in the interest of complete harmony, urged his friends to vote for Cock. The latter was then accorded twelve votes and the unanimous election.

There seems to be no doubt that the election of Ansel Humphreys as the first Grand Master was the general intent and expectancy. He had served as District Deputy Grand Master of Missouri, and was held in the highest esteem for his personal character and Masonic competence. Oliver Cock was not a party to the intrigue for he was not present in Iowa City at the time, and the convention had to be adjourned for five days while a man rode horseback to Burlington to report what had transpired and request his presence. Cock then journeyed to the capital city and was duly installed. He was judged by his brethren "in every way worthy of the distinction." It may be added that consolation eventually came to the friends of the defeated candidate, for Ansel Humphreys was elected Grand Master of Masons in Iowa and served in that office from 1847 to 1849.

The other Grand officers elected by the convention were Timothy Fanning of Dubuque (Senior Grand Warden), William Reynolds of Iowa City (Junior Grand Warden), Benjamin S. Olds of Bloomington (Grand Treasurer), and Theodore S. Parvin of Bloomington (Grand Secretary). In spite of plotting and log-rolling, Hartsock failed to win an office, but eventually he was honored with positions of trust.

A constitution and by-laws, fashioned after the pattern of those of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, were discussed and adopted by the convention. Among the adjustments made by the newly-constituted Grand Lodge of Iowa was the dropping of the Missouri numbering and the establishment of an Iowa sequence. In the new charters the designations were: Des Moines Lodge No. 1 (Burlington), Iowa Lodge No. 2 (Bloomington), Dubuque Lodge No. 3 (Dubuque), Iowa City Lodge No. 4 (Iowa City).

In the evening of January 8, 1844, the historic convention at Iowa City adjourned. Ansel Humphreys, in his character as District Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, opened a session of that jurisdiction for the purpose of constituting the Grand Lodge of Iowa and installing its officers. In solemn procession the officers elect marched from the Iowa City Lodge

hall to the Methodist Episcopal Church. Following an oration there by Joseph Williams, the Grand Lodge of Iowa was constituted "in due and ancient form," and its officers installed. The historic day closed with a banquet at Chauncey Swan's hotel. It was morning, January 9th, when the first session of the Grand Lodge of Iowa "was closed in ample form."

In this month of June, 1944, the Grand Lodge of Iowa of Ancient, Free, and Accepted Masons (Clifford D. Jory, Most Worshipful Grand Master), gathers in Cedar Rapids, for the one hundredth anniversary of its organization. This Centennial Communication was originally planned to take place in Iowa City, scene of the Grand Lodge's birth. The honor was yielded to Cedar Rapids because so many of the facilities of the natal city were in use by the personnel of the armed forces as the Commonwealth of Iowa was doing all that was asked to support the nation in the universal struggle for freedom, security, and peace.

HARRISON JOHN THORNTON

The Ringlings of McGregor

"Stand back, everybody! The elephants are coming!"

It is circus day and the parade is starting! Thousands of Iowans have thrilled to those magic words and craned their necks to see the giant pachyderms in their red velvet and gilt trappings come swinging down Main Street, stared wide-eyed in wonderment at the red and gold massive circus wagons with their pacing lions and tigers within, felt the heart quicken and the blood flow faster as they watched the daring feats of the aerialists under the 'big top', laughed uproariously at the antics of the clowns, and gazed incredulously at the side-show freaks. And at mention of the circus, the name of Ringling is suggested, for the two are almost synonymous in the minds of many people. Yet probably few Iowans are aware that the Ringling brothers, founders of "the greatest show on earth", staged their first performance at McGregor.

This is how it all began.

A bustling river port after 1855, McGregor was a typical frontier town of that era. Grain and hogs were shipped by steamboat from this strate-

gically located market. It was a common sight to see wagons loaded with produce, drawn by horses or oxen, lined up for a mile awaiting their turn at the city scales where buyers would bid on the produce. While many settlers bought farm land from the government at \$1.25 per acre, others settled in McGregor to engage in business, with the result that the population of McGregor increased from 280 persons in 1857 to 4000 in 1875. The town grew like a mushroom and its reputation spread far and wide. In sharp contrast to the rougher element in the town, some cultured families maintained their standards of gracious living. Rapidly increasing fortunes were invested in beautiful furniture, paintings, diamonds, and blooded horses. A few of the older living residents, among them C. F. Spaulding, can still recall the beautiful horses and equipages paraded on Main Street each Saturday evening.

To this promising young boom town of the Midwest, possibly in 1860 though too late to be counted in the census, came August Ringling, harness maker, bringing his wife and children, then consisting of three sons, Albert (Al), August (Gus), and Otto, to open a harness shop. The first definite evidence of the Ringlings in McGregor is an advertisement on December 10, 1862, in the *North Iowa Times* that "A. Ringling has

moved his harness shop from Arnold's corner, opposite the Western House, to his new building two doors below Walter and Brother." This location, according to J. J. Schlicher, "was on the northwest side of Main Street, about the middle of the block between Fourth and Fifth streets." Apparently August Ringling had enough confidence in the future of the harness business in McGregor to own his own shop.

Perhaps convenience was a factor in moving to the new building, for the Ringlings were living in a house on the same lot. Whether this was their first residence is not certain. Miss Gretchen Daubenberger, daughter of a pioneer Iowa lumberman, remembers that her mother called on Mrs. Ringling in a frame house near the Congregational Church, which could have been the same.

The kind McGregor neighbors soon welcomed the Ringling family in the community. When a Lutheran Church was organized in 1862, August Ringling was one of the charter members. The early record books, in German script, preserved by St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church of McGregor, contain the names of Mr. and Mrs. Ringling and the two oldest boys as communicant members. A new constitution drafted on June 1, 1870, was signed by ten of the original charter members, and the name of August Ringling ap-

pears on this list also. It seems that he was a prominent and active member of the church while he lived in McGregor.

Competition in the harness business was keen. Though August Ringling was a master of the trade, he had rivals in the community. The local demand for fancy hand-made harness was seriously depressed by the war, and the cost of living was high. By the end of 1862 there were four boys in the family, the youngest, Alfred, less than two years old and the oldest only ten. Whatever the causes may have been, Ringling sold his new shop building for \$100 early in 1863 and went to work in the larger shop of William Koss. He was probably employed as a master craftsman at good wages.

That August Ringling was proud of his skill is apparent from a notice published in October, 1863. He and five fellow workmen in the Koss "Establishment" offered to bet \$100 that they could make a better set of harness and collars of any style than J. Peickart and his two men. The challenge was not accepted. But the day of hand-tailored gear for horses was passing. Koss sold out in 1865 and two years later, when Ringling left the shop, it was owned by Hartwig and Peickart.

According to an advertisement in the *North*

Iowa Times on October 2, 1867, August Ringling had resumed the operation of his own harness business. "A. Ringling — Half Way up Main Street", he explained, "is turning out some of the handsomest as well as the most substantial harness that McGregor Citizens or Visitors ever looked upon or used. None but the best workmen are employed and only the best material used in manufacture. For Harness, Collars, Saddles, Bridles, and repairing of all kinds — Go to A. Ringling — nearly opposite the Murray House." His characteristic pride of craftsmanship is obvious and apparently he had accumulated some capital. The house and half lot where he had lived for several years was purchased in the name of Mrs. Ringling in 1864 and in 1867 he bought an adjoining half lot, according to the county records.

Meanwhile, his family had grown. Charles was born in 1863 and John in 1866. The two oldest boys were nearing the age when they would have to quit school and learn a trade. If they went to work in their father's shop they could serve their apprenticeship and contribute to the family income. According to the census of 1870, when Al was seventeen and Gus was fifteen, they were actually so employed. The capital investment in the shop that year was reported to be \$600 and

the annual value of materials used in manufacture was estimated to be \$2000.

And yet the Ringlings were not as prosperous as the census seemed to indicate. The two heavily mortgaged half lots they had owned were sold in 1868. Before that time, they had moved to a place up Walton Hollow which is still known as the Ringling house. In May, 1870, they seem to have been living above the harness shop in a two-story building "opposite Walter Brothers". By that time there were seven boys in the family, Henry having been born in 1869.

Miss Gretchen Daubenberger remembers when the town's practical nurse and midwife came to see her mother who was baking bread. "Mrs. Daubenberger," she exclaimed, "the Ringlings up the Hollow have just had another baby. There isn't a second sheet for the mother's bed, nor a stitch of clothing for the new babe. It is a pitiful state of affairs."

"My mother was ever generous to a fault," Miss Daubenberger reminisces, and so, when the nurse left, "she took with her a generous roll of baby clothes we children had all worn, fresh bed linen, and most of the morning's baking for the Ringling family, and mother set to work to 'sponge down' another batch of bread."

Traveling circuses were numerous in this pe-

riod of American history. Following the close of the Civil War, both the North and the South longed for amusement, and enterprising show managers took advantage of this fact. Some circuses traveled by rail, some in horse-drawn vehicles, and others by steamboat, stopping at the towns along the Mississippi between New Orleans and St. Paul. With money flowing freely and with a large floating population, McGregor was a mecca for these traveling shows. Careful perusal of the early files of the *North Iowa Times* will attest this fact, for, during the summer of 1866, McGregor residents were privileged to witness the Consolidation Circus; Mike Lipman's Colossal Combination of Circus and Trained Animals with acting bears, sacred bulls, performing buffalo, plus a troupe of Bedouin Arabs arrayed in the wild fantastic garments of their native race; and Dan Castello's Great Show, Moral Exhibition, and Wonderful Wild Animals. In 1867 circus lovers were enthralled by Maginley, Carroll and Company's Great Consolidated Circus in June, Haight & Chambers' Colossal Circus and Ames' New Southern Menagerie in July, and Orton Brothers Great American Circus in August.

That audiences obtained their money's worth is evident if the following announcement by an advance man in the June 13, 1866, issue of the *Times*

was a criterion. "Dan Castello's TRIUMPHANT PROCESSION, Surpasses in point of grandeur, extent and real worth, any gratuitous display gotten up. Its magnificence approximates more closely to one of those Pageants of Royalty and Chivalry of the Glorious Golden Days of the 17th Century than any attempt to emulate Regal Splendor ever undertaken by managerial effort, or indeed by proprietary liberality."

It was in such an environment, pregnant with action, excitement, glamour, color, and adventure that the Ringling boys spent their youth. In 1869, Al and Gus, with twelve other boys of their age, formed a club of Young Fantastics to participate in the celebration of the Fourth of July. Clad in fancy costumes, some rode and others led the horses that pulled the "bouquet wagon" in the parade. On the platform was a dome surmounted by two figures representing Liberty and Washington. Around the base were thirty-seven girls in white dresses depicting the States. "It was the most attractive wagon that anyone ever saw."

The Ringling boys were interested in acrobatics. Al in particular spent many hours practicing feats of balancing, rope walking, and juggling. One day in 1870, according to a well-known anecdote, the boys rushed into the harness shop to describe the wonders of Dan Rice's Great Paris

Pavillion Circus which had unloaded from a steamboat early in the morning. Presently the cannon ball juggler and pole balancer came into the shop. The leather belt and socket, with which he held the pole while an acrobat performed at the upper end, was broken. Learning that the circus man was a former McGregor boy, Mr. Ringling refused payment for mending the belt, whereupon the juggler gave him and his family a pass to the circus. The joyous anticipation of the boys was exceeded only by their spell-bound admiration of the performance. According to the story their destiny was then and there determined.

On the following day, the young Ringlings commandeered all the horse blankets and the old rag carpets available in the neighborhood. Yards of discarded rolls of wall paper were decorated with Bluebeards, Little Red Riding Hoods, Tom Thumbs, and Robinson Crusoes, mounted on rollers, and wound from one to the other by a crank, while Al prepared a lecture on the characters depicted. Costumes were fashioned from old curtains and cast-off clothing. Billy Rainbow, an aged billy goat, and the neighborhood dogs were borrowed, and a tent was erected with the horse blankets and old carpet.

Finally, the great day for the premiere ar-

rived! It was to be the first performance of Ringling Brothers' Circus! Neighborhood children thronged to the tent and Alf, Charley, and John collected ten pins, the admission price, from each youthful customer. Al "lectured" on the painted nursery-rhyme and story characters as Otto turned the crank and all the boys turned somersaults and other acrobatics to the limit of their ability.

A heart-warming story about that first circus was told often by the late Miss Ida Townsend, former teacher in the McGregor public schools. Eager to attend the show the Ringling boys were giving on the lot now occupied by the Herman Coobs Blacksmith Shop, Ida presented herself promptly with ten pins clutched tightly in her small fist. Very often, however, young boys are unpredictable in their actions and she was told that because she had holes in her stockings they would not admit her. Heartbroken, she returned home, weeping.

Many years later, so Miss Townsend related, the Ringling circus was scheduled to appear at LaCrosse, Wisconsin, and, eager to see the "greatest show on earth", she went to LaCrosse to attend. Seeing Alf and John on the lot, she went up to shake hands and to congratulate them on their success. The conversation turned to the

early days in McGregor, and the three laughed over the time she had been turned away from their show because of the holes in her stockings. She assured them that her stockings were quite without holes, and she hoped they would not prevent her attendance at their performance a second time, since she had come to LaCrosse for that very purpose. To Miss Townsend's dismay, Alf told her gravely that, holes in her stockings or not, for the second time, they would have to refuse to sell her a ticket of admission. However, he told her, with a twinkle in his eye, she might attend the performance on one condition — that she would be their guest for the afternoon and the best seat under the big tent would be hers!

It was the late Dr. John A. Walter, veteran Iowa dentist and mayor of McGregor for many terms, who, as a young man, played the cornet in the Ringling Brothers' Band. Dr. Walter liked to talk about the old days when he and Al Ringling were pals. "It was Al who really started the Ringling Brothers' Circus", Dr. Walter explained. "When the show started on the road, there were but three people in it and Al used to go out front and do his tight-rope walking and that would draw a crowd. I played with the Ringling band for quite a spell when I was a young man, but I didn't like it very well. We had to sleep in the

bandwagon and when we got stuck in the deep mud, and the roads were pretty bad in those days, the band boys would have to get out and heave the wagon out of the mud. It was when the Ringlings lived up Walton Hollow that the boys put up swings and a trapeze on top of a knoll and practiced there. In their first shows, they had trained pigs and other domestic animals, and Al balanced a plow on his chin, and I can recall a man by the name of Gaffney who performed with cannon balls."

The Ringling circus did not, of course, develop at once from the childish show of 1870. Al practiced bareback riding and plow balancing, Gus went to work at his trade away from home, and Charles and Alfred who were musically inclined played their instruments for their own amusement. The family moved across the river to Prairie du Chien, thence to Stillwater, Minnesota, and finally returned to Baraboo, Wisconsin, in the fall of 1875. Meanwhile, Al had begun traveling as a juggler and rope walker with small shows. By the end of the seventies he was managing a little troupe. In November, 1882, Alfred and Charles helped their older brother form the Ringling Brothers' Classic and Comic Concert Company. John became a member in December, and Otto joined the troupe in the following spring to tour

with the "Carnival of Fun". The circus was organized in 1884.

In a diary kept by Miss Fannie Cone of McGregor is the following entry in her delicate handwriting. It is dated July 31, 1890, from Berlin, Wisconsin. "The weather is very warm but we could not go to the lake till after 'The Circus' that had to be taken in by all. The Ringling Brothers were brought up in McGregor, so I felt an interest in seeing what they have attained to in all these years. They are self-made men, and have succeeded. Everything pertaining to their business is managed in the most perfect manner. No loud talking is heard, each person knows just what he is to do and does it. They employ one hundred and fifty men, have over one hundred fine horses. Their R. R. train is a long one. Al, Alf, John, Charles, and Otto are the names of the boys. I made myself known to Al, the eldest, and he seemed glad to see me, and gave me a pass for myself and friends to attend the evening performance. Mary went with me and when he saw me, he took us to the Reserved seats. On our way home, we saw him and his wife, whose name was Morris. I remember the family. So, I had a chance to thank him for his courtesy and say goodbye. I could say truthfully that I had enjoyed the entertainment. John Ringling gave an

exhibition in balancing first on a chair placed on glass bottles on a high stand. He placed his hands on the back of the chair, then threw his body straight up in the air. This was repeated on three additional chairs, he going from one to another as he balanced them. At last, hurdles were given him and he balanced on those too. His brother, Alf, was near us, and I noticed that he kept his eye on John during the whole time till he was through."

McGregor is proud of the fame and fortune of the Ringling Brothers who had their humble beginnings here. Two years ago, the McGregor Historical Society began gathering data, incidents, and stories about the Ringlings from old residents who had known the family, for careful preservation in the files at the McGregor Museum. Tentative plans to place markers at the various Ringling sites — the spot where the first circus was staged, the Ringling home, the site of the August Ringling Harness Shop — have been made by the Historical Society, so that visitors may become acquainted with these historical facts.

Meanwhile, each summer in McGregor, another amateur circus is staged in Bill's or Freddie's or Junior's backyard by the younger generation.

MARIAN CARROLL RISCHMUELLER

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Established by the Pioneers in 1857
Located at Iowa City Iowa

PUBLICATIONS OF THE SOCIETY

The Iowa Journal of History and Politics
The Palimpsest—A monthly magazine
The Public Archives Series
The Iowa Biographical Series
The Iowa Economic History Series
The Iowa Social History Series
The Iowa Applied History Series
The Iowa Chronicles of the World War
The Iowa Centennial History
The Miscellaneous Publications
The Bulletins of Information

MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the State Historical Society may be secured through election by the Board of Curators. The annual dues are \$3.00. Members may be enrolled as Life Members upon the payment of \$50.00.

Address all Communications to

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Iowa City Iowa